

## COMMUNITY BASED TRAUMA HEALING WORKSHOPS IN LATIN AMERICA

By Val Liveoak

The AVP Advanced level Community Based Trauma Healing CBTH() workshops grew out of the work that African facilitators did on the Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities (HROC) workshops that began in 2003. Friends Peace Teams' African Great Lakes Initiative (AGLI) developed these workshops in response to the so-called ethnic conflict in Burundi and the Civil War that followed it, and the Genocide in Rwanda. (Later HROC spread to Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.) In 2007, after five years of work developing AVP in Colombia, a country with the longest running Civil War in the Americas (now over 60 years!), the AVP facilitators were interested in the HROC model that could help with healing and much-needed reconciliation. Alba Arrieta, a Colombian AVP Facilitator and Val Liveoak, Coordinator of Peacebuilding *en las Américas* (PLA), the Latin American Initiative of Friends Peace Teams travelled to Rwanda and Burundi in Jan. 2007 to see HROC in action. Also there was Cecilia Yocum, then Clerk of PLA, doing an assessment of the facilitator training program for a grant they had received. Cecilia, a psychologist, had helped the Africans develop some of their training materials several years before.

After witnessing the African workshops, the three began work on a version that would be culturally appropriate for Colombia and that used even more experiential techniques, *Educación Popular*, in Spanish. In 2008, they debuted four workshops in Colombia, and asked if the participants, especially those who were AVP facilitators, if they thought the workshops would be useful in their context. The response was "Definitely!" The following year 6 Colombian AVP facilitators were trained as facilitators, with another 6 trained in 2010. (And 6 AVP facilitators also trained in Central America that year.)

There have been over 25 CBHT workshops offered, the great majority in the region of the Northern (Caribbean) coast, where the war is still very active and there is also fighting between different paramilitary and drug trafficking groups. One in 10 Colombians has become a displaced person due to violence in the last 20 years, and a large number of the 4 million Colombians displaced by this violence live in squatter communities outside the large cities in the region. These workshops are much in demand, and have received many accolades from participants. One young man, who recently had decided to leave the Army, said he had been molested as a boy, but after the workshop, he no longer desired vengeance. Other participants had their sons lured away by promises of work, dressed as guerrillas and then killed to increase the Army's body count, and one mother worked through her feeling of guilt about supporting her son's decision to go to what they thought would be a good job.

The workshops focus each day on, first, building a sense of security and trust, second, dealing with memories of loss, and third, reconnection with the community and rebuilding trust. Activities include AVP's Agenda Previews, Gatherings, Light and Livelies, Exercises and processing, and Evaluations. Additional exercises or activities include small mutual support groups that meet during most sessions, art and journaling activities, relaxation and calming exercises including Groudnings (borrowed from the Trauma Healing workshop of the Indonesia Initiative of Friends Peace Teams), and psycho-drama activities.

Like AVP, CBTH can be healing but is not therapy. We work as a group, and do not focus on any one person's experience. Participants re-learn how to listen well, rather than give advice, and how to be a supportive presence. Participants are encouraged to continue to meet with mutual support groups after the workshop, and for those with a need for follow-up, community counseling is recommended (although it is not frequently available—hence the need to keep working with a support group. When healing occurs, it is, I believe because the participant has decided to let go of her/his pain. And even when that is not fully accomplished, the workshop supports greater resilience and a sense of perspective about how the trauma or loss fits into the participant's whole life. Many victims feel great guilt, and are able to let go of that and to start to regain trust through the workshop, especially when it is done within a single community where people can support one another.

The CBHT workshops complement AVP because as our African colleagues noted, unhealed trauma can lead to further acts of violence, and by bringing people together for healing, a sense of community can be rebuilt. Along with AVP, which deals with violence in the present and future, CBTH workshops helps people integrate their past.

HROC, the Indonesia Initiative, and PLA are also now doing workshops in the US and other countries outside their regions. For more information and workshop schedules, contact: Val Liveoak at [PLA@FriendsPeaceTeams.org](mailto:PLA@FriendsPeaceTeams.org); Nadine Hoover at [Indonesia@FriendsPeaceTeams.org](mailto:Indonesia@FriendsPeaceTeams.org), and David Zarembka, AGLI/HROC at [dave@aglifpt.org](mailto:dave@aglifpt.org).

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